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ABSTRACT

Small schools (with enrollments of 300 or less) are being rediscovered as models for effective schools. Currently 26.9% of America's school systems enroll over 500,000 students in more than 26,000 small schools staffed by 50,000 teachers. Small schools have pioneered many educational "innovations": non-graded classrooms, individualized instruction, cross-age groupings, peer tutoring, and emphasis on the basics. Current efforts to reduce student/teacher ratios, use the community as a resource, and "mainstream" mildly handicapped pupils also have their roots in the small schools of the past. Small schools offer benefits in areas of personal relationships, student morale, teacher-student interaction, administration, and curriculum and instruction. Although research on optimum school size is mixed, research suggests that class size is related to pupil achievement, smaller classes are more conducive to improved pupil performance, smaller classes provide more opportunities to meet individual needs, pupils in small classes have more interest in learning, and teacher morale is higher in smaller classes. Strengths inherent in small schools that support characteristics/practices associated with findings from "effective schools' research" include orderly, serious, safe, attractive school climate, clear school mission; strong administrative leaders who emphasize instruction; high expectations for student achievement; presence of student, staff, and school evaluation systems; supportive home/school relations. (NEC)

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ERIC DIGEST

SMALL SCHOOLS

THE ADVANTAGES OF SMALL SCHOOLS

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Feb 86

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ERIC DIGEST

SMALL SCHOOLS

THE ADVANTAGES OF SMALL SCHOOLS

Americans are rediscovering the small school. Education has proclaimed that "bigger is better" for so long that many have become believers in a doctrine which they have not truly examined. The National Commission on Excellence in Education (1983, 5-6) called the United States "a nation at risk" because our ". . . educational institutions seem to have lost sight of the basic purposes of schooling, and of the high expectations and disciplined effort needed to attain them." The large size of so many of our schools is seen as one factor contributing to declines in test scores and increases in violence among students (Wynne, 1978). The restructuring of schools to smaller entities may remedy some of the problems facing today's educators.

What is a small school?

School enrollment size has been the major criterion used to identify small schools. Although disagreement exists over what enrollment figure should be used to determine "small," the figure most commonly accepted is 300 or less (Swift, 1984; Schneider, 1980; North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, 1974). The National Center for Education Statistics (Grant and Snyder, 1983, 62) reported that 4,270 school districts, or 26.9 percent of total public school systems in the United States enrolled fewer than 300 students. Over 26,000 schools are represented in these districts (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1983, 149). These schools are attended by more than one-half million students and employ 50,000 teachers (Swift, 1984).

Where are America's small schools? Although small public

schools do exist in large cities, the vast majority are located in rural areas (Sher, 1977; Edington, 1976).

What contributions have small schools made in the past?

Well into this century, America's public education system was dominated by small schools. In an age before calculators, microcomputers, television, and rapid transit, hundreds of thousands of children learned their arithmetic, civics, geography, and other lessons in the small -- often one-room -- school of the past. In most cases, students learned independently and progressed at their own rate. In these schools, it was not unusual that only two or three students attended the same grade. While older pupils helped the younger ones, the teacher was able to take time to individualize lessons and provide personal contact with each student on a daily basis. Younger pupils became fully aware of what was expected of them in the next grade because they could see and hear older children working on advanced lessons. The education received in these schools did have value, and perhaps that is why the small school of the past is so often looked upon with nostalgia.

It would be interesting, perhaps astounding, to be able to identify the number of successful professionals in business, education, science, and other disciplines who received their public education in a small school. In addition, examples of many of today's better known educational "innovations" that originated in small country schools of an earlier time include non-graded classrooms, individualized instruction, cross-age grouping, peer tutoring, and an emphasis on the basics--to

name a few. Current efforts to reduce student/teacher ratios, use the community as a resource, and "mainstream" mildly handicapped pupils also have their roots in the small school of the past.

What strengths are inherent in small schools?

There exists in the small school a sense of pride, and an attitude and sense of personal possession and involvement on the part of students, parents, teachers, administrators, and community residents. People residing in small communities generally have a feeling of extreme closeness. The school is referred to as "our school." To a great degree, the school is the community center in many small towns and rural areas.

Over 20 years ago, Barker and Gump (1964) proposed the "inside-outside perceptual paradox" which stated that even though larger schools were more impressive on the outside, upon closer scrutiny the smaller school provided a better quality of education. The small school can offer benefits in several areas (Beckner, 1983; Dunn, 1977; North Central Association of College and Schools, 1974):

- Personal relationships
- Student morale
- Teacher-student interaction
- Administration
- Curriculum and instruction

Personal relationships

The size of the school does not inhibit personal interaction; it encourages it. Small schools typically serve a community nucleus. This invites strong support from parents and community members as well as closer working relationships among the school staff. In a small school it is not unusual for teachers,

administrators, and school board members to know each other well. This can lead to easy acceptance of new ideas among friends as well as a strong sense of identification and belonging.

Student Morale

Morale among students tends to be higher in small schools. There are fewer students to be leaders in clubs and organizations and to participate in athletics and plays. Hence, students are generally exposed to more opportunity to develop leadership skills in a greater diversity of situations. Often literally everyone must participate in order to make a project a success. This promotes among students a sense of belonging--of pride in their community, their school, and themselves. As a result, students are likely to have better attitudes toward school and less likely to create discipline problems.

Teacher-Student Interaction

Teachers are more apt to know their students as individuals and the family background from which they come. This enables teachers to more knowledgeably make special provisions for individual needs and talents and receive better cooperation from parents in resolving problems that may arise. Students in small schools also interact more frequently and informally with the teacher and with each other.

Because relationships between teachers and administrators tend to be more personal and informal, there is a greater tendency for cooperation among the staff. Also, teachers who live and work in small communities are more likely to be viewed as respected and valued citizens by other community members.

Administration

Small schools are manageable. Paperwork is present, but not inhibitingly so. There is usually less red tape and fewer regulations. Scheduling is much more flexible than in a large

school, and can be easily altered to accomodate instructional activities. Record keeping and reporting activities are less complicated and time consuming. Bureaucratic layering is at a minimum, allowing relatively easy access between students, teachers, and administrators. Individual problems of both students and faculty can be addressed more readily by administrators. School administrators are more likely to spend time out of their office to be with students and teachers on a regular basis and routinely visit classrooms and observe instruction.

Curriculum and instruction

Due to low pupil/teacher ratios, the school is more likely to be learner-centered with strong emphasis placed on individualized and small group instruction. Small schools have greater potential to allow instructors to emphasize such teaching methods as discussions, oral reports, independent study, simulations, essay tests, etc. By contrast, large schools with large class sizes have traditionally led to reliance on lectures and objective tests that stress recall. The potential for student self identity, participation, and expression is thereby enhanced in small schools.

Multi-grade teaching is a common practice in many small schools. Cross-age mixing of students allows younger students exposure to lessons and expectations of older students as well as opportunities to receive personalized tutoring from them.

Smallness also permits changes in curricula and organization of instructional materials with relative ease. It is easier to arrange schedules in order to participate in field trips, assembly

programs, parent-teacher conferences, etc.

The advantages of small enrollment size can be appropriately summarized as follows:

- Students are at the center of the school.
- Discipline is usually not a serious problem, thereby resulting in an increase in time spent learning.
- Teachers still have a sense of control over what and how they teach.
- A minimum of bureaucracy allows for more flexibility in decision making.
- Low pupil-teacher ratios allow for individualized instruction and more attention given to students.
- Relationships between students, teachers, administrators, and school board members tend to be closer.
- Parental and community involvement tends to be stronger than in larger schools.

What does research say about optimum school size?

Research has not yet revealed an "optimum" school or district size. The studies which have been conducted show a broad range enrollment for the "best size" school. The Education Research Service (ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management, 1982) summarized the 119 publications printed between 1924 to 1974 regarding school size. The differences for optimum size varied by as much as 370 students for elementary schools, 50 students for middle schools, 679 students for junior high schools, and over 1,700 students for senior high schools. The variance for acceptable minimum and maximum size schools was even greater. Due to differences in design and methodology of the many studies summarized, it is difficult to compare them and thus impossible to draw hard and fast conclusions.

Although research on optimum school size is mixed, most

teachers and parents clearly feel that class size radically effects the quality of instruction and achievement of students. Recent research supports the benefits of small class size. Glass and Smith (1979) reported that, all things being equal, the difference of being taught in a class of 20 students versus a class of 40 would result in an advantage of 10 percentile points on national achievement tests. They also found that the greatest gains in achievement occurred among students who were taught in classes of 15 pupils or less. Klein (1985) reports that other researchers have found that students in smaller classes typically receive more individual attention from the teacher; pay more attention to their studies; the curriculum takes on greater, depth, breadth, and richness; and discipline problems are diminished. A summary of research on class size suggests that (Glass, 1982):

- Class size is strongly related to pupil achievement.
- Smaller classes are more conducive to improved pupil performance than larger classes.
- Smaller classes provide more opportunities to adapt learning programs to individual needs.
- Pupils in small classes have more interest in learning.
- Teacher morale is higher in smaller classes.

How do characteristics and practices of "effective schools' research" relate to small schools?

Recent research has identified numerous practices and characteristics associated with effective schools. Among characteristics commonly noted are (Buttram, 1983; Fried, 1982):

- A school climate that is orderly, serious, safe, and attractive.

- A clear school mission where there is consensus on goals for the school, consensus on teacher objectives and priorities assigned to those objectives.
- Strong leadership by the principal which focuses on instruction.
- High expectations for student achievement which are clearly communicated to students.
- Instructional activities absorb most of the day.
- There is an evaluation system which includes student progress, the staff, and the school itself.
- Supportive home/school relations.

Small schools need not apologize for their size. The strengths inherent in small schools clearly support characteristics and practices associated with findings emanating from "effective schools' research." The challenge facing administrators, teachers, parents, and students attending small schools is to capitalize on the many advantages of smallness in order to provide the most meaningful education possible.

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